

Social Anxiety: What Am I Trying to Control?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *Social Anxiety and the Burden of Control | From Managing Perception to Living in Congruence* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which describes social anxiety as the strain of taking responsibility for outcomes outside our control, and congruence as the alternative. Search “social anxiety burden of control” on the site to find it.

Social anxiety is often described as fear of judgment. More precisely, it is the strain of taking responsibility for whether we are liked, accepted, included, or kept. Choose one recent social moment that stayed with us: a meeting, a gathering, a conversation we replayed afterward. We find the contract underneath it, sort what was ours from what was not, and ask what congruence would have looked like. This is a reflection, not a test for social anxiety. A few words per space is enough.

UNDERNEATH The quiet contract	If I can manage how I am perceived, I can manage whether I am abandoned. From there the nervous system assigns itself an enormous task: how another person experiences us, whether we are approved of, whether we are excluded or retained, whether connection is preserved.
WHAT IT BECOMES Performance	We guess what they value, what they will judge, what will protect us, and enact those guesses in real time without access to the other person's inner world. High stakes, incomplete information, an uncertain outcome, and total responsibility. The body experiences it as chronic vigilance.
THE ALTERNATIVE Congruence	Not indifference. Living from our values, temperament, and emotional truth rather than from strategic self-modification. We still care about our impact. We no longer claim responsibility for the inner experience of the other.
IN THE MOMENT Noticing	The discomfort of disapproval does not vanish. What changes is the response to it. We notice, and choose not to turn the moment into a control project. <i>There is a bodily response here.</i> <i>There is sadness or embarrassment here.</i> <i>There is a thought trying to correct or fix this moment.</i>

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THE SKI TRIP

THE MOMENT	A backcountry ski trip with new friends, in college. No leader yet. The snowpack does not look stable, and no one has dug a pit. Confidence is moving the group toward the descent.
THE CONTRACT	If I speak up, I might be seen as a drag, overly cautious, not fun. If I stay agreeable, I keep my place.
NOT MINE	Whether they like me. Whether the group's mood holds. Whether anyone follows.
MINE	My read of the snow, my values, and what I say.
CONGRUENCE	“This doesn't feel safe to me. I'm going to head down.” Not an accusation, not a lecture. A clean statement of reality and boundary.
AFTERWARD	Some may continue, and most of the time they will be fine. I can belong to myself even when I am not immediately approved of.

There is no option without fear. Speaking up risks abandonment. Overriding our own knowing risks self-betrayal. The question is which fear we choose to live with.

The moment and the contract

Find the agreement the nervous system made before we had a chance to agree to it.

THE MOMENT

Where was I, who was there, and what was at stake socially?

How strong was the anxiety? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

UNDERNEATH

The quiet contract

Finish the sentences in my own words.

IF I CAN MANAGE HOW I AM SEEN, I CAN MANAGE WHETHER I AM...

WHAT I WAS AFRAID WOULD HAPPEN IF I GOT IT WRONG

RESPONSIBILITY

What I took on

Check what I made myself responsible for in that moment.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ How they experienced me | ☐ Whether I was approved of |
| ☐ Whether I was included or left out | ☐ Whether the connection was preserved |
| ☐ The mood of the room | ☐ How they felt after I spoke |

SORTING

Mine, and not mine to author

Move each item into a column. My impact, my honesty, and my choices are mine. Another person's inner experience is not.

MINE

NOT MINE TO AUTHOR

THE LOAD

The stakes felt high, the information was incomplete, the outcome was uncertain, and the responsibility felt total. Where did that land in my body, and how long did it stay?

The performance and the noticing

What we adjusted to secure the outcome, and what was happening in the body while we did.

PERFORMANCE

The guesses

Performance is built on approximation and prediction.

WHAT I GUESSED THEY VALUE

WHAT I GUESSED THEY WOULD JUDGE

WHAT I GUESSED WOULD PROTECT ME

PERFORMANCE

What I adjusted

What I said, hid, softened, agreed with, or did differently than I would have otherwise.

NOTICING

Three sentences

Finish each one about the moment. The aim is to notice, not to fix.

THERE IS A BODILY RESPONSE HERE:

THERE IS (SADNESS, EMBARRASSMENT, FEAR) HERE:

THERE IS A THOUGHT TRYING TO CORRECT OR FIX THIS MOMENT:

The chest still aches when we feel unseen, and the stomach still tightens when someone pulls away. Congruence does not anesthetize this. It changes how we respond to the sensation.

Congruence

Control seeks safety through prediction and management. Congruence offers safety through coherence and orientation to self.

FROM MY VALUES

What I would
have done

If I had acted from my values, temperament, and emotional truth, what would I have said or done?

A CLEAN STATEMENT

In one or two
sentences

Not an accusation, not a lecture, not an emotional appeal.

IF THEY PULL AWAY

Failure or
incompatibility

Some forms of rejection express incompatibility rather than failure.

WHAT THE CONTRACT SAYS IT WOULD MEAN

WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN INSTEAD

THE COST OF BEING REAL

Disappointment can exist as a natural cost of being real in relationship.

WHAT I MIGHT LOSE:

WHAT I KEEP:

NEXT TIME

One place, in one relationship, where I could let belonging form rather than engineer it.

We stop trying to manufacture acceptance, and make room for it to form, or not, without defining our worth.